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## Some thoughts on historical narrative in twentieth-century Italian literature

The presence of historically-based narrative (i.e. prose writing that brings the past into focus) has been noticeable in Italian writing throughout this century and particularly so in the latter half of the century. Recent critical interest has drawn attention to the continuing flow of historical novels,<sup>1</sup> but an extensive survey of the use of history in Italian prose in the twentieth century would need to take account not only of the historical novel (and the great diversity of approach to it) but also of writing not strictly within this *genre*, writing that has been guided by personal history and not (or not solely) by a cultural interest in more general historical perspectives.

From the end-point of the twentieth century, the ideological positions of earlier decades reveal themselves more clearly as restraints that influenced literary choices and had particular effect on the novelist's interpretation of history, as well as on the reception of the viewpoint expressed. In the post-1945 decades, there emerged, seemingly untroubled by the polemics that accompanied the publication of some historical novels (notably by Tomasi di Lampedusa, Pratolini and Morante), a considerable range and amount of prose writing that brought a focus to bear on immediate-past history, personal and public, in ways that complemented the novel and provide us now with contextual meaning for literary discussion of the period. As well as those who aspired to literary statement, there were writers who presented their material in the form of factual reporting – the class of writing sometimes described as “Witness literature”, as in *memoirs*, diaries, letters, tracts, dialogues, third-person accounts of lived experience. Here I can do no more than make brief reference to the class of *testimonianze*, which has become a recognisable output even beyond that first period which Calvino has described as a time of irrepressible story-telling. The few examples I give are chronicles of group experience: in a class of its own is the lucid and moving statement by Giacomo Debenedetti on the mass deportation of Jews from the Rome Ghetto – a tract entitled simply *16 ottobre 1943* which was first published by the periodical *Mercury* in December 1944; I would include here Dacia Maraini's 1972 narrative *Memorie di una ladra* (Bompiani) which treats the lives of women in poor and marginalised social conditions; similarly there is Danilo Dolci's mediation of the conversations of Southern farm-labourers in the 1974 *Non esiste il silenzio* published by Einaudi. In some of the multi-authored collections that address specific areas, particularly those where misfortune or disadvantage applies, there is material that is of contemporary sociological value which may acquire importance as future historical documentation. These works show no sign of diminishing, and are a tribute to the social climate of the second half of this century in which increasing voice has been given to those who are at the margins of what has generally been considered mainstream culture. Variations in literary expression, as ways for sharing human experience, have become more visible and more commonplace. The greater space given in our present culture to individual

personal experience is matched by an openness in according status to the record of experience as potential history in the making. It is left to Time to decide the literary value of that recorded experience. The immediacy of some of these chronicles makes them documents of the human condition, the most compelling invite a reflective gaze. Other works fall nearer to the *genre* of the historical novel, although at a considerable remove from the nineteenth-century models.

That modern and contemporary writers have recourse to the past is not an innovation of these last two centuries, since it was always so. The *genre* of the historical novel in Italy, dating as it does from early last century, has a relatively short history and some would have seen its demise in the short term; on the contrary, it has shown itself to be a survivor well over a century after the 1848 version of *I promessi sposi*, and furthermore it seems capable of adapting to changing cultural climates. Long before Manzoni provided the Italian model for the historical novel, however, the tellers of tales were returning to earlier events and adventures that had captured people's imaginations; the centuries-long process of literary re-presentation of Charlemagne, for example, first verbally and then later in written forms, to some extent mirrors the process by which modern writers have treated the historical events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which have been of most consequence for modern Italy.<sup>2</sup> Such a comparison, of course, needs to allow for the effects of the more pluralistic society inhabiting the latter twentieth-century. It would probably be accurate to distinguish the contemporary use of history in literature as exhibiting more varied hues in its passage from a mythologizing intent to occasional reductiveness, more so than treatment of Carolingian material at the hands of distant narrators. Before looking further at the contemporary scene, it is worth noting that the *romanzo cavalleresco*, and not only that area of the Italian tradition, attests to the presence of historical narrative in Italy over a very long period, much longer than that of the now vigorous historical novel.

An analysis of the continuation of this *genre* in contemporary Italian literature could follow many perspectives of interest both for the individual works or for sub-categories within the *genre* and for the overall light cast on narrative writing in Italy towards the close of the twentieth century. Questions about the author's intent in using history may overlap with extra-literary perceptions and open questions of wider cultural interest. The direction of the analysis might instead be one of testing the suitability of the *genre* to incorporate a variety of narratorial techniques as instruments in conveying the interpretative intent. For instance, is there incompatibility in accepting in the same category such works as Natalia Ginzburg's epistolary novel *Caro Michele* (1973), and Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa* (1980) which has characteristics relating it to the "giallo"? The former novel has almost no concrete historical detail except the dates of the family's correspondence and their discovery of Michele's involvement with terrorists, whereas Eco's novel is a vast mixture of erudition and invention of detail that could have been (but is not) historically authentic. These two are not, in fact, the most starkly opposite in the range of the contemporary historical novel which encompasses writers of all literary currents. The complexity of the picture regarding this *genre* at the moment of this discussion encourages further investigation. Additional to the texts themselves (a not inconsiderable quantity by now), consideration ought to be given to the writers' own statements in relation to history in literature, which appear separately, if at all, in a great variety of publications.

As an indication of a few modern views on the *romanzo storico* let me quote three definitions in the second half of this century: the first is from Vittorio Spinazzola's critical assessment in 1990 of the chain of development from De Roberto's *I Viceré* (1894) through Pirandello's *I vecchi e i giovani* (1913) on to Tomasi di Lampedusa's *Il gattopardo* (1958), the other statements are from the writers Anna Banti and Maria Corti speaking about the period of Neorealism in mid-century which accompanied a surge of interest in re-writing the past. Spinazzola says:

Il connotato profondo del genere [cioè del romanzo storico] è appunto l'instaurazione di un paragone, più o meno ellittico, tra una fase di civiltà ormai trascorsa e quella cui l'autore e il suo pubblico appartengono.<sup>3</sup>

Spinazzola's terms include temporal distance and comparison of two historical situations; the important factor is reflection on difference between two sets of historic circumstances. In essence, this maintains the perspective of earlier definitions by Anna Banti and Maria Corti. In her article "Romanzo e Romanzo Storico" written for *Paragone* in 1951, Anna Banti had this to say:

... la storia si estende fino a ieri, fino all'ultimo minuto del nostro vivere, essa ci strappa di mano la lettera or ora arrivata e si nutre del nostro respiro: noi la chiamiamo cronaca. In senso assoluto, il moderno romanzo oggettivo può [...] considerarsi, [...] romanzo di cronaca, [...] Nelle testimonianze più nobili, invece, si direbbe che la cronaca si allontani di un passo, si risolva in proiezione meno diretta, [...] Ne segue, talvolta, un effetto poetico la cui vera causa è da rintracciarsi nell'eterno dettato della memoria: la memoria che ha fatto in tempo a scegliere, che suggerisce e trasferisce il fatto crudo dall'ordine dell'avvenuto a quello del supposto. In questo caso la cronaca è sorpassata, la storia è raggiunta, il romanzo realista è già romanzo storico.<sup>4</sup>

Maria Corti, in her detailed survey of Neorealism (in 1978), also treats of the difference separating chronicle and novel (in this case the *romanzo partigiano*):

... il genere diario cronachistico o cronaca diaristica o «memoria» non richiede quel distacco spirituale e temporale necessario al genere romanzo partigiano, in quanto esclude in partenza il punto di vista macroscopico della corallità a favore di quello microscopico della individualità di chi scrive e registra, annota, postilla il reale.<sup>5</sup>

Here we have emphasis on the institution of a deliberate authorial act of comparison between the past and present, and an awareness that the distance separating them is both temporal and spiritual. The temporal distance may be of any length, childhood to adulthood, for example, or yesterday's pre-condition for today, or the distance of years, but it is the spiritual distance of an attempt at objectivity that counts. This kind of distance may be achieved by the third-person narration that represents the external view of the non-participator, or by a type of narration in any number of gradations from that third-person's external view to first-person involvement, which re-visits the past in an attitude of calm detachment. Modern taste seems to demand that authorial act of comparison and not simply the re-enactment of the past for the sake of the curious. How to interrogate the past is a major question for the writer which then, rightly, exercises the critic's powers of interpretation.

Among the most illustrious examples of historical narrative in Italian this century are the writings of Primo Levi (publishing in the years 1958–1987) and Leonardo Sciascia (publishing 1956–1989): the first drew on personal experience and the second on observations of contemporary reality as well as on documentation of the past; both compared past and present, in a spirit of reflective detachment in which memory had time to filter reality; and both communicated at the macroscopic rather than (or not only) at the individual level. In these terms, their writings are clearly more akin to the historical novel than to the documentary, the memoir, or chronicle, and therefore I would opt to describe them as writers of historical narratives which in some cases were properly historical novels. However, accepting these authors as writers of historical novels stretches our notions of what constitutes the modern *romanzo storico* since these works are immediately different from those in traditional mould, both in their conciseness and in their explicit presentation of a negative judgement on history. There is little or no role for invention in Levi's texts on Auschwitz and on the return from there, and some of Sciascia's investigation of documents relies more on reasoning through the known facts than on re-creating a situation with the help of invented detail. In different ways these writers produced texts that are significantly different from the almost contemporary *Gattopardo*. In any case, with both Levi's and Sciascia's historical novels the requisites of *distacco* and reflection, along with the comparison of present and past have been met. The question then arises of whose and what comparable experience is set against the past in the course of a historical novel.

In relation to this question, two references that come from some of Professor Tom O'Neill's work on modern Italian narrative are of interest here: one is a (1993) comment of his in relation to *Il gattopardo* and the other is from the foreword written by the author of *Il taglio del bosco* for an edition of that text prepared by Professor O'Neill in 1963. To take this earlier date first: Carlo Cassola gives the following account of his *poetica* around the time of his writing *Il taglio del bosco* –

“La poetica negativa che nel '37 m'aveva spinto a scrivere *La visita* mi guidò negli anni seguenti. Il mio ideale era riuscire a scrivere il maggior numero possibile di pagine senza dire niente (senza dire niente che avesse un significato particolare).”

Cassola continues, speaking of his intention in such existential narration to shun any scrutiny of his characters' psychology, or even of description and development of theme.

“Anche *Il taglio del bosco*,” (he continues) “a cui misi mano alla fine del '48, era concepito come una narrazione puramente esistenziale [...] Ne avevo già scritto una metà, quando un avvenimento che sconvolse la mia vita privata mise in crisi anche la mia letteratura. [...] Così, quando alcuni mesi dopo fui in grado di rimettermi a scrivere e ripresi in mano *Il taglio del bosco*, lo cambiai profondamente. Conservai l'elemento esistenziale del taglio, [...] ma ne feci il semplice sfondo, il semplice contrappunto di un sentimento particolare, il dolore del protagonista per la morte della moglie.”<sup>6</sup>

Cassola's natural instinct as a writer to refuse tradition in favour of a pared-down and generally disconcerting style, devoid of psychological depth, is a literary profile shared to some extent by Calvino, among others, and it was suited to the literary

climate of Neorealism in the years mentioned above; on the other hand, his re-writing of the novel to include an emotional dimension closely reflecting his own recent loss brings this work into line with an aspect present in much historical narrative. I refer to the kind of relationship that becomes apparent between the author and the historical context of the work: at one extreme the author of the historical novel may be reconstructing a period or event from documentation on which he or she ostensibly holds a neutral stance, and at the other extreme the material is drawn from auto/biographical material.

Generally, one expects that the greater the temporal distance between the author's present and the text's historical context the less likelihood there is that the author and protagonist will share experience, but the possibilities of narrative reporting being as varied as they are, this sense of participation may still be conveyed.

In this regard, Professor O'Neill's remark in the course of his article "Of Ants & Flags: Tomasi di Lampedusa's *Gattopardo*" is worth noting;<sup>7</sup> he says "The historical novel must also be at one remove an autobiographical novel." This might at first seem a contentious statement, but in the *literary* sense in which I understand he meant it, it is undoubtedly true. He might agree with me that the "one remove" could in fact be understood in the Pavesian sense of an author's mythic reality, i.e., in the meaning Pavese gives in his Diary jotting on 15th Sept. 1943. I quote:

"Di ogni scrittore si può dir mitica quell'immagine centrale, formalmente inconfondibile, cui la sua fantasia tende sempre a tornare e che più lo scalda."

Pavese mentions Dostoevskij's crowd scenes and the isolation of prison found in Stendhal. The jotting concludes: "Mítica è quest'immagine in quanto lo scrittore vi torna come a qualcosa di unico, che simboleggia tutta la sua esperienza."<sup>8</sup>

If the historical novel is not autobiographical in the above sense of an interiorized, mythic view of the world, then it may be autobiographical in Cassola's sense of experience translated into a reality of parallel material facts, equally valid in literary terms. Calvino's later analysis of his stylistic choices in writing *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (in 1947) emphasizes the validity, and in his case the necessity, of this filtering mechanism. I quote from the Introduction to the novel when it was republished in 1964:

Per mesi, dopo la fine della guerra, avevo provato a raccontare l'esperienza partigiana in prima persona, o con un protagonista simile a me. Scrissi qualche racconto che pubblicai, altri che buttai nel cestino; mi muovevo a disagio; la mia storia personale mi pareva umile, meschina; [...].

Quando cominciai a scrivere storie in cui non entravo io, tutto prese a funzionare: [...] più lo facevo oggettivo, anonimo, più il racconto mi dava soddisfazione; [...] Cominciai a capire che un racconto, quanto più era oggettivo e anonimo, tanto più era mio. [...] era questa la mia esperienza, la mia esperienza moltiplicata per le esperienze degli altri. E il senso storico, la morale, il sentimento, erano presenti proprio perché li lasciavo impliciti, nascosti.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the view projected by the author is coloured both by personal experience and by the contemporary historical context and indirectly influenced by it. As we have

seen in Spinazzola's definition of the *romanzo storico*, the author's present and that of his public (which will only for a brief time coincide) is one of the terms against which the past is set; such measurement implies a moral dimension in the use of history. Manzoni, of course, was aware of this in his intention that his story about seventeenth-century Spanish oppression in Milan would be read and understood by the nineteenth-century Austrian oppressors in his own time.

The extent to which a work reflects the material events and history, as well as the attitudes, of an author varies and we expect to have to seek this experience and these attitudes in transmuted forms. Their presence in the text is at times a source of polemics, despite the attenuating effects achieved by the use of memory. The publication of Tomasi di Lampedusa's *Il gattopardo* (1958) and Elsa Morante's *La Storia* (1974) excited some negative criticism on their appearance because of the cultural-political positions expressed in the novels. In reference to a review of Tomasi's text, Sciascia commented:

Il fatto è che *Il gattopardo* è un libro scritto da un gran signore. Un gran signore « non è altro che qualcuno che elimina le manifestazioni sempre sgradevoli di tanta parte della condizione umana e che esercita una specie di profittevole altruismo»: illuminante definizione che il Tomasi mette nei pensieri di Calogero Sedara, che gran signore non è.<sup>10</sup>

Gabriella Contini identifies the main charges against *La Storia* as the use of pathos in the characterisation of the child *Useppe*.<sup>11</sup> In relation to this, Elsa Morante's social and political concerns (which she shared with Pier Paolo Pasolini) for the underprivileged children of the Roman *borgate* were well known, and not surprisingly were reflected in her text.

Of course, it is to be expected that reflections of authorial concerns will occasionally provide a thematic thread subtending the enactment of historical circumstance, whether that history is at the core of the text or belongs in an infrequently evoked frame of reference, and not all of these themes are likely to be polemical. Rosetta Loy's most recent novel *Ciocolata da Hanselmann* (1995), gives an example of an underlying concern with the feminine condition which provides a modern social context for the story's discussion of historic interest which circles around the problem of evil, and how to apply justice and forgiveness. The appearance of such secondary themes, or authorial positions, is part of that autobiographical link between writer and his/her material that was mentioned above, and in the most effective cases such themes have the role of integrating and vivifying the documentary material.

Evidence from soundings taken in this wide field of the contemporary historical novel shows the adaptability of the *genre* to new conditions, and the readiness of writers to draw lessons from the past. Literature's use of historical sources has been fruitful and keeping step with modern historiography has been enlivening. Gadda might have been alluding to the force of this invigorating *connubio* when in 1939 he predicted future possibilities for the historical novel: "Messo in buone mani, il romanzo storico [...] potrebbe essere il principe dei generi narrativi."<sup>12</sup>

Let us hope that there will continue to be *buone mani* recording and interrogating the past, illuminating the human condition through a flexible use of narrative forms of all kinds.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In a Paper given at the 1993 International Conference *Rinnovamento del codice narrativo in Italia dal 1945 al 1992*, "La Fortuna del romanzo storico" now published in the volume *I tempi del rinnovamento* (Rome: Bulzoni, and Leuven University Press: 1995) 79–133, Ermanno Paccagnini listed 23 historical novels published in Italy between 1945 and 1963 and for the short span of four years from 1978 to 1981 he cited 25. The historical novel has continued to flourish since then. In the article opening the same volume ("Il problema del romanzo storico", cit., 19–47), Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti treats the relationship between the literary text and the author's presentation of history across some of the main examples of the genre from Tommaseo's *Fede e bellezza* through to contemporary authors.
- <sup>2</sup> Calvino's 1964 Preface to his *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* gives a vivid account of the "smania di raccontare" that began as face to face interchange and led to written stories which were a blend of lived and borrowed experience: "Chi cominciò a scrivere allora si trovò così a trattare la medesima materia dell'anonimo narratore orale". Cp. Italo Calvino *Romanzi e racconti*, a cura di Mario Barengi e Bruno Falcetto (Milan: Mondadori, 1991) vol. 1, 1186.
- <sup>3</sup> Vittorio Spinazzola *Il romanzo antistorico* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1990) 6.
- <sup>4</sup> Anna Banti "Romanzo e romanzo storico" in *Paragone*, II (20 agosto 1951): 6.
- <sup>5</sup> Maria Corti "Neorealismo" in *Il viaggio testuale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1978) 52.
- <sup>6</sup> Carlo Cassola *Il Taglio del Bosco*, edited by T. O'Neill, with Author's Foreword (London: Harrap, 1963) 42; 48–49.
- <sup>7</sup> *The Italianist*, 13 (1993): 180–208
- <sup>8</sup> Cesare Pavese *Il mestiere di vivere* (Turin: Einaudi, 1962) 243–44.
- <sup>9</sup> Italo Calvino, cit., 1198–99.
- <sup>10</sup> Leonardo Sciascia "Il gattopardo" in *Pirandello e la Sicilia*, ora in *Leonardo Sciascia Opere 1984–1989* a cura di Claude Ambroise (Milan: Bompiani, 1991) 1162–63.
- <sup>11</sup> Gabriella Contini "Usepepe" in *Vent'anni dopo La Storia. Omaggio a Elsa Morante*, a cura di Concetta D'Angeli e Giacomo Magrini (Pisa: Giardini editore, 1994) 185.
- <sup>12</sup> Carlo Emilio Gadda *L'Ambrosiano* 23 February 1939, now in *Carlo Emilio Gadda. Saggi, giornali, favole*, vol. I a cura di Liliana Orlando, Clelia Martignoni, Dante Isella (Milan: Garzanti, 1991) 836–37.

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